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The Egyptian Constituent Assembly on November 30 approved a draft constitution that includes problematic provisions limiting freedom of religion or belief for all Egyptians.

“The constitution was drafted without a balanced representation of all the Egyptian constituencies; as a result the religious freedom provisions of the draft constitution are deeply flawed. If approved by referendum, the draft would enshrine into law one group’s view of religion that could severely limit religious freedom for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The draft also would undermine the goals of the January 25, 2011 revolution, which many saw as the first step toward a new day for rights and liberties in Egypt after decades of dictatorship,” said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. “The draft text favors an interpretation of one conservative school of Sunni Islam above all others and fails to provide for full conscience protections, for Muslims, non-Muslims, and dissidents. Furthermore, religious communities not considered among the ‘divine’ would be deprived of their religious freedoms.”

Hasty passage of the draft constitution concluded a contentious process. The major Islamic institution in Egypt, Al-Azhar, the Constitutional Court, as well as many liberal, Christian, minority and dissenting representatives abandoned the process, voicing concerns that the process was flawed, the representation not balanced, and the draft not reflective of the principles of freedom. The document is scheduled for a popular referendum on December 15.

“The Egyptian people have a unique opportunity to lay the foundations for a prosperous and stable society that builds upon the talents of all their citizens, regardless of faith or belief,” continued Lantos Swett. “Unfortunately, this draft suffers from many procedural and substantive deficiencies, and if it were to become law would set the stage for more – not fewer – religious freedom violations and sow the seeds of discord among the Egyptian people, as well as future uncertainty, instability, and insecurity.”

For Egypt to achieve lasting stability, it must fully respect the rule of law and comply with international human rights standards including freedom of religion or belief. USCIRF recommended in 2012 that the U.S. government designate Egypt a “country of particular concern” (CPC) because of the particularly severe violations of religious freedom perpetrated or tolerated by the government, such as discrimination, intolerance and violence committed against religious minorities and disfavored Muslims.

For an initial analysis of problematic provisions in the Egyptian draft constitution, go to: <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/special-reports.html>